

Adding Learning Value to the Assessment and Feedback Process for Students and Tutors at Multicultural University

Background

The University of Bradford is a multi-cultural learning environment which has seven academic schools, catering for around 10,000 students from over 110 countries. It has been ranked highly for graduate employment, with a focus on the ethos 'making knowledge work'. However, one of the problems facing higher education institutions is the traditional, paper-based assessment and feedback mechanisms, and how to meet expectations of timely, quality feedback to large student cohorts. Since 2005, National Student Surveys have shown that undergraduates are significantly less positive about assessment and feedback than any other aspects of the learning experience.

The university wanted an e-assessment solution that could be used for both formative and summative assessments, easily integrated with its existing virtual learning environment (Blackboard), but also be 'free-standing' where necessary. In addition, the university wanted to enable instructors to work independently, without requiring high levels of support, and to operate through a gatekeeper on behalf of the university examinations office to assure quality and security.

Solution

As the leader in assessment management systems, Questionmark Perception was an obvious choice, says John Dermo, the university's E-Assessment Advisor, based in the Learning Technology Team. It now utilises Perception Authoring Manager and a shared repository as well as the Questionmark Blackboard Connector, which enables scheduling and launching of Perception assessments from within the Blackboard environment. "Perception has a wider range of question types, in particular drag-and-drop and text match questions," says John. "Installing the Blackboard Connector has also transformed the use of formative e-assessment as it has enabled instructors to easily schedule and deliver regular formative and self-assessments through the virtual learning environment."

Increasingly, lecturers are setting online assessments based on the week's studies simultaneously with practical or laboratory sessions. Students can take them where and when they choose to receive regular feedback on their progress, which has led to higher rates of engagement, participation and attendance. Instructors also agree they are getting more value out of time previously spent marking test papers by hand as they can develop and improve existing assessment questions, improving the quality and quantity of feedback.

After consultation with academics, administrators and technical support, and organising funding and hardware licences, Perception's installation was quick. John says

the documentation in the Questionmark knowledge base was comprehensive and it was a case of following it step-by-step. The university also made use of the invaluable network of contacts within the Questionmark user community.

The main challenges were related to communication. E-assessment involves a wide range of people – students, instructors, managers, central and department administrators, technical support, academic support, invigilators and so on – so it was important to clarify precisely in the e-assessment process who was responsible for what, how and when. "We wanted to avoid the situation where some vital step in the process might be overlooked because everyone assumed it was someone else's responsibility," explains John. Consequently, a flowchart of the process was developed and precise, detailed rules and regulations were drawn up specifying the duties of each group involved. Just as assessment practices for paper-based examinations had been established and documented, the same is now true for computer-assisted assessment.

Conclusion

Results from a recent survey of students at the University of Bradford revealed positive attitudes about e-assessment and Questionmark Perception, reflecting the added value to the assessment and learning process. Students were also confident that grades and logins are secure, with computer assisted-assessment allowing more accurate marking. It also increased accessibility and could be used across the broad range of subjects covered at the university.

The University of Bradford is now building on its successes with two exciting new projects. By early 2009, it will be ready to test a new, integrated examination system, which brings together exam timetabling software Syllabus Plus with Questionmark Perception and a student record system by using thin client systems and smart card technology. The university is also piloting the expansion of e-assessment to include distance learners. Although still in its early stages, the aim is to deliver the same formative and summative assessments available to students in the UK through Perception to learners as far away as China, India and the Middle East.

More information

Questionmark Contact:

Email: info@questionmark.co.uk

Phone: +44 (0)20 7263 7575

Web: <http://www.questionmark.com>

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